

Facing hatred

I came to the United States in 2016—from Paris to Pittsburgh—in the aftermath of a horrific series of terrorist attacks in France that targeted everyone. As a clinician-scientist, I wanted to continue focusing my efforts on therapies to restore vision rather than constantly check the news. As a Jew, I wanted to live according to ethical principles nurtured by my identity in an open society that does not consider deviation from secularism as questionable. As a father, I wanted my children and grandchildren to grow within a humanistic perspective and at the same time to honor their dual heritage. In 2012, the very mild reaction to the killing of soldiers and Jews, especially of children in a Jewish school, in Toulouse, was saddening, and there was great uncertainty about how a society infected by anger, fear, and intolerance would evolve. Two weeks ago, the mass killing at a Pittsburgh synagogue proved what I knew but wanted to forget—that no place on Earth is “safe” from hatred. But regardless of where any one of us lives and works, we are faced with the same, immense challenge: The quest for facts, enlightenment, and care versus ignorance and hatred matters more than ever.

In the early 1930s, Albert Einstein asked Sigmund Freud to contribute to an initiative launched by the League of Nations that sought prominent individuals to promote peace and its values. Their exchange, written under the title *Why War?*, fell short of finding ways to counteract violence. It was published after Hitler had already been appointed chancellor. The rest is history. Should we simply believe that today there is a new cycle of history taking place? Moreover, in contrast to the League of Nations, nobody is asking the scientific community for help today. Science, with its fundamental quest for truth, or at least facts, and its open discourse, seems to have lost its iconic status, despite its contributions to societal well-being. The scientific community should not passively watch the disastrous rise of hatred worldwide.

We are tasked with building a society of knowledge and care, where truth, integrity, and respect for all prevail. The heartening responses of health care providers to incidents in the United States and France epitomize this ideal. In 2015, after the mass killing at the Bataclan theater in Paris, nurses and physicians spontaneously converged on hospitals to help the victims, limiting the massive toll of the attacks. Likewise, in Pittsburgh, nurses and physicians treated the wounded, including the presumed killer, with efficiency and humanity. Helplines offering information and support were set up for a whole city in mourning. Religious and political



Shalekhet (Fallen Leaves), by M. Kadishman, located in the Memory Void in the Jewish Museum Berlin, Germany, is an art installation dedicated to all victims of violence and war.

leaders of all faiths and backgrounds, and community members from across the cultural spectrum, were united against hatred. In both cities, the responses were deeply rooted in society's best, most inspiring traits. I specifically recall Dr. Jerry Rabinowitz, a colleague and friend to many, who was a victim in the Pittsburgh tragedy. He was a pioneer in providing treatment during the early years of the AIDS epidemic—one who saved many lives and gave selflessly to all. He was shot as he volunteered to help the wounded.

Caring means that each life matters, and that we all can and should be supported to grow and give back to society. The French Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas asserted that looking into the face of one's fellow man invokes the imperative: “Thou shalt not kill.” This sounds naïve and far too simplistic in the face of guns and strongly held prejudices. Yet, is there anything else in the world more meaningful than looking into human faces and listening?

If we are truly an enlightened and caring society, then our response to violence must be to reject resignation and to include actions by those who seek truth and fact. This is now, as ever, our inheritance.

— José-Alain Sahel



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